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LACAN'S HAIRDRESSER: AN ENCOUNTER WITH KAROLOS KAMBELOPOULOS

This interview with Karolos Kambelopoulos, who was Jacques Lacan's hairdresser for a decade, took place in August 2008 in Chania, Crete, at the site of the 'Monastery of Karolos' which includes a hairdressing salon, theatre (named after Maria Callas, who was one of the clients of Karolos), café, art and sculpture gallery. The website, which includes images of Karolos artworks and sculpture as well as some autobiographical details, is at www.karolos.gr The interview was conducted by Stavros Psaroudakis, Ian Parker and Erica Burman. (Stavros had interviewed Karolos about his work beforehand, and was responsible for arranging this encounter.)

Karolos Kambelopoulos was born in the Greek community of Egypt and from 1944 until his retirement in 1991 he worked as a hairdresser, first in Cairo and then in Paris, at the Caritas Sister salon, where through the years he styled the hair of numerous world-famous French and international celebrities. Besides hairdressing, Kambelopoulos has widely exhibited his sculptures, paintings, ceramics and monotypes around the world (in 2008, a French art television channel made a documentary about his art and life).

In the town of Chania, "Karolos" is very much known for his "Monastery", a 16th century Catholic monastery which had been left to ruin; Karolos funded its restoration and made it available for artistic and cultural events to take place. It was while strolling in the Monastery's gallery that Stavros had a first chat with Kambelopoulos: "Since you are a psychologist, you must have heard of Dr Lacan?" "He was my client", Karolos told him, and this of course was a relationship to Lacan interesting enough for an interview to be worthwhile arranging (though the reader must appreciate that parts of the account relating to Lacan's marriages and death of his daughter may not correspond to other published accounts that are grounded in empirical truth claims).

In this interview we focus on this particular aspect of the life of Karolos Kambelopoulos, his time working as hairdresser for Jacques Lacan.

KAROLOS KAMPELOBOULOS: He was a friend of mine, and a client because I was his hairdresser. I was cutting his hair for many years because he likes to be very nice looking and was very interested in all the beautiful women in Paris

But why did he come to you, there are other hairdressers?

It was because I was working in the top salon, Carita in Paris, so that's why he came to me and she brought me luck on that, Madame Leiris who had a gallery which included work by artists like Picasso, for example, and he was a friend of hers, so she brought him to meet me, and for me to cut his hair

So Madame Leiris was already coming to you, and she introduced Lacan to you

Yes, he was in those circles, and they liked him back then. Yes, and he was very interesting as well, but I have to say about his psychoanalysis that it was a bit crazy. You can imagine that people came to see a doctor, and when you go to see a doctor when you have problems you're a bit afraid. So you can imagine that when you go to a psychoanalyst, when you go to see Lacan, you sit down on the divan and speak, and if nobody wants to speak he goes pop pop twice, and says 'That is 500 francs and I'll see you tomorrow', and so then when they come the next day they are afraid that they'll have the two slaps and so they speak

How do you know he did this?

He told me, and he used also to tell me that I'm more of a psychiatrist or psychologist than him. But many people came to him who committed suicide, even his own daughter committed suicide

Did you know about psychoanalysis before you met him?

Yes, but you know that although he was nice all the time he was having to deal with snobbish people, and the snobbish people in Paris went to Lacan because he was famous. And there was a time that everybody, and especially Greek people, would go to psychoanalysis with Lacan

What period of time did you know him?

It was from 1965 to 1976

So that's quite a key period when he was becoming very popular and giving his lectures, but what happened, did you fix a time to cut his hair?

He was never a one to wait in the salon, he never wanted to wait. I would arrange everything, because every day I did 30 clients and so when he had the appointment I knew I had to arrange everything. And then one time he came and I couldn't arrange everything. I had four clients and so he goes up to have his shampoo and his blue rinse, and he says to me 'What time will you see me', and I told him I'm not free so you have to wait a bit, go and sit down. Anyway he had a pink bib on, and the blue rinse was going down on it, and he was

annoyed, and then he got up and then went out and went home, with the blue rinse still on and the pink bib. The owner of Carita told me that he'd gone home with all of the blue rinse on him, and she told me that I have to go and to see him at home. So, I had to go to his house. She was very furious, and she was the one who insisted that I follow him to his house and cut his hair. So I went there and he was in his bathroom, sitting there waiting, and he told me 'I like Greek people'. So then I cut his hair, and then I when I was finished I took the tip of hundred francs and I said to him 'Now Doctor Lacan I don't any more want to cut your hair anymore'

So, that was the last time you saw him?

That was the last time I cut his hair. He never came back, and the owner of Carita said to me 'It was because of you that Lacan came here, but now we have lost him'. I used to see him in exhibitions and in the theatre and he used to say to me 'I like you very much, but you don't want to cut my hair'. It wasn't pride, my pride that made me say 'No', and refuse to cut his hair again, it was just that he was such a spoilt man

Did you know exactly what he wanted done? When he came did he tell you exactly what he wanted? Who was in charge?

No, I just did it, the same style every time, he just wanted to be nice looking. The first time I said that I would do something special, and I knew from the first time that he wanted to be very good-looking and I made everything right for him. I didn't change the style over those years; it was always the same style. It was a style that went with the bow tie

Did he give any advice to you during the sessions, personal advice about your life, advice from the doctor?

No, because I don't need analysis, I don't need anything like that, and I told him from the first time that there is a reason now why people have to go to psychoanalysis. It used to be that everyone in the family used to speak to each other if there was anything wrong, and he agreed

Did you give him any advice?

I told him everything that I knew about how to deal with people, and told him that you should just let them speak if you have asked them to speak to you. He was very rich and he married three times, and his third wife, an actress, was very beautiful but then she became crazy after ten years. She also used to come to have her hair cut, but then when her daughter committed suicide she became very furious and went crazy. I wrote him a letter but he didn't reply

After a year he saw me in the street and he said to me 'Hello Karolos, how are you', and I told him 'You're not a very nice human being because I sent you a very nice letter'. I told him that I also did the hair of the wife of the President of Senegal, and when they had a family member who committed suicide I wrote them a letter and I got a reply, but I didn't get a reply from Lacan when I wrote to him. I used to meet him many times outside an exhibition, and he used to speak to me and I would speak to him, but I was clear that I never was going to cut his hair again. You know, he was furious because I wouldn't cut his hair. I only went to his house that one time to cut his hair that was the last time, as I said. When he came to the Carita salon he just had his hair done, he never had a massage or a shave or anything like that

How often did he come?

Every two weeks, for him it was normal to come every two weeks to have his hair washed and cut, of course he washed his hair at home as well, and then when he came to the salon he used to pay at the desk and used to give the tip to me. It was always a good tip, one hundred francs, which was a lot at that time. He had a reputation of being mean, but he wasn't mean

Did you like his hair, was it good thick hair?

Yes, I used to like his hair; he had a very good head of hair, nice to cut, very nice and thick. And with his hair I was able to make a style that would fit with his face and with his body and with his mind, but he was very narcissistic when he went to the reception he was, like 'I am Doctor Lacan'. He didn't say it, but that's the way he behaved so that everyone would know who he was and make sure that everyone likes him and thought he was important

What else did he talk about when you cut his hair?

He often made conversation, and he used to speak to me especially when other people came and he had many stories to tell about people he knew, but not about what his clients told him. He told me how to speak to clients. He used to ask me many questions, and used to say to me that I was very good because many people came to me to have their hair cut. Many people all round the world think that Lacan was the best psychoanalyst, but many people don't know about the suicides they never speak about this

So what do you think of psychoanalysis generally, do you think meeting Lacan changed your mind?

No, because I don't want to be psychoanalysed, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I used to have other psychoanalysts among my clients,

but again I used to tell them that people living 50 years ago never needed psychoanalysis, they just didn't need it then

He knew you came from Egypt?

Yes, I was born in Cairo in a Greek family and so I had a Greek passport and knew Greek, but one thing I know is that don't need psychoanalysis. From five years old I knew what I wanted and knew that when people are no good me I would throw them away. I even threw away my father and my brother. When you are in a Greek family the first son is treated like the king, and this was the case with my older brother. My brother had the whole family running round him, including my father. That brother was the most important one in the family, and my father used to give chocolates to him to my older brother. He didn't used to give it to me, then one day I was eating nuts and my brother said 'I want those nuts' and I told him I wouldn't give them to him. So, he told my father, my brother told my father about this, and then my father said to me 'You must give them, give the nuts to your brother' and so I took the nuts and I threw them out the window

So you turned the nuts into an object of desire

Yes, because from being a small boy, I thought, why should I be treated as less than my brother? And this is the reason I just kept away from my father and my mother and my brother. Instead I used to be with my grandmother, and some days I would go into the dining room sometimes and my father used to say to me 'Give some water to your brother' and I said 'I'm not a servant'

Do you think these events had any bearing on you becoming a hairdresser, well this is a stupid psychoanalytic question, but what is the connection here do you think?

Well, you know my father was very rich, he had a restaurant and lots of money and used to play cards and used to bet money on the horses and when I was thirteen years old he lost it all. I had to work. I decided I wanted to work as a hairdresser and I was working then as one in Cairo, it was at the time of King Farooq. I stayed there until I was 20 years old and then I went to Paris. I started doing sculptures in 1965 and then I was making paintings before 1965. I was working with Jackson Pollock style and that of Antonio Banderas who was a friend of Pollock. I stopped working 1991, which is when I left the salon. From 1991 to now I work freelance, and I go to Paris and New York and Italy and I go back and I do the hair of clients. Lacan knew about my art because used to come to the exhibitions. He was very interested in art, and especially in Greek art and Greek mythology. He knew everything about Greek mythology, he didn't need to ask me anything, and he used to say to me that the Greek

mythology was the best. But although he was very interested art he was very capricious. As I said, he used to say to me 'You are more of a psychiatrist or a psychoanalyst than I am'. When I see people for the first time used, I know what it was that made them unhappy, and it was the same with him. It was almost like he was able to read their mind. When I see people I know when they're happy or unhappy. When I first meet people who demand to have their hair cut, I am able to have an impression of them. In the case of Lacan, he was very happy because he had every woman that he wanted. He could make love with any woman he wanted and it was also for that reason that he was very spoilt. He got everything he wanted and so that is why he was so very angry at me when I wouldn't give him what he wanted. He was spoilt

It must have been a shock view to refuse him if he got his own way for so many years?

He was very shocked to have someone refusing something because he was Lacan, but I said to him, 'Now I don't want to cut your hair'. He met me at exhibitions, but he never realized or learnt anything. It was no use saying to me 'You are a mean person'. He used to say to me 'I like you a lot, I like the Greek people, why don't you cut my hair?', but he would never apologise

It was a clash of strong personalities.

Yes, for years, in exhibitions or in the theatre, when I saw him I would never go to him first. He used to come to me to speak to me, or in the street used to come to me to speak to me I was walking one day in Montparnasse, and he came up and said 'Hello Karolos'

What he says about Greek civilisation is very interesting because there are other kinds of psychoanalysis that try and find an origin to culture in Greece, but the Lacanian tradition doesn't really have this fixation on Greece

Well yes, it was his own view that, that he thought that Greek civilisation was great. He used to tell me this, used to tell me it was the greatest, used to say 'Hello Karolos, I like Greek people, I like you' and then to go up to have his hair washed, and I do miss that actually. I do miss that because in that sense he was very kind and very friendly but I do think I was the only person to refuse him something and he really didn't like that. But you know the reason I was furious was not so much because of him but because of the clients I had to leave. I had to leave the four clients when I went to his house. The four clients were sitting there waiting, and when I told the four clients when I back went back they were very happy when I told them that I had cut his hair and that I told him that I would not cut his hair again. But the owner of Caritas was very annoyed about this, and she used to say to me that when she used to see

Lacan outside the salon, not coming into the salon, and she used to say to me 'Because of you I lost Lacan', and he went to a completely different place

Do you know where he went?

No, I don't know where, and I'm not interested in where he went. For me it was finished, completely finished, and I wasn't interested, and for that I'm very happy. I love my clients, and I didn't want to keep him as my client

How did it take to cut his hair?

It took half an hour. I would do it very quickly. Someone else was washing his hair and getting him ready and giving in the wash and rinse her and then I just used to go and cut the hair in half an hour and then that was the end. It was just half an hour to cut the hair and dry it

Were the great hairdressers at that time in Paris men or women?

There were two main salons, that of Chanel and Caritas. They were the two main hairdressers and over 20 years at Caritas 500 clients used to come into the salon every day, and there was 150 people working there. It was unusual for someone to go to a man as a hairdresser. Caritas used to say that it was better for a woman to cut hair but many women didn't want a woman to cut their hair. They wanted a man to cut their hair, and I speak several languages and I'm able to speak to them and Madame Caritas only spoke French. Lacan used to say 'I want a man to cut my hair'. He preferred a man to cut his hair because a man is strong, and he used to say that women are only for making love to. He was very direct to me, I was like a friend, and here is another reason why he was so shocked when I said to him that I was not going to cut his hair again. I don't know whether he went to another man to have his hair cut, and can't even speculate about that

Did he look at the mirror constantly when you are cutting his hair?

No, he didn't used to look in the mirror; he used to read the newspaper so he never used to see his face in the mirror. He used to be reading, he just didn't seem to be interested in that

So there weren't any immediate signs of narcissism?

No, and in my book I don't write about Lacan. In my book I write about the different people that I've seen at the salon from 1944 to 1991. The book is appearing in French and Greek next year but I don't mention Lacan, and you know the Greek analysts who have asked me about Lacan don't want to believe

what I tell them about him. I think he enjoyed listening to me, it was part of the experience of having his hair cut and he used to like hearing about all the clients, different characters in the salon. He was interested to know about the other people. When he died I didn't go to the funeral because I was working at the salon. I read about it in the newspapers and I have to say that I was not happy when read about it. I used to tell people that I wasn't doing his hair at the end of his life because I was not his slave

It sounds like you enjoyed telling him that you didn't want to cut his hair

Yes, I did enjoy it because he never thought that I would say it to him. He thought I would never do anything like that but I was very naughty, I took the hundred francs and then I told him. He was actually very nice to the women in the reception when he used to pay and they used to say 'Dr Lacan' and used to be very happy to see him. He was very nice to them, because he was very much into women. His wives always knew about other women

You told us before this interview that you do think sexuality is very important

Yes, it is very important, and I'm sorry to tell you this, but for the women, for many women, women think much more about sex than men. I know, because from 1944 to 1991 I did the hair of many women, of thousands of women, and I know everything because they used to talk to me about sex

Did Lacan talk to you about sex?

Yes, he always used to talk to about sex, and you know that he had the painting of Courbet, 'L'Origine du monde'. In the sessions he used to talk about sex as well and maybe often a lot of women used to like to go with him, and maybe it was because he was a good lover. But Lacan didn't only want to take women because of the sex but because he wanted to conquer them. This is the reason why he was interested in women, not so much because of sex but because he wanted to conquer them. I was mostly working with very rich women, with artists, and different well-known figures. I did the wife of the Shah of Iran and an Egyptian princess who used to wear a veil so that it was very important that I used to see their hair out and cut their hair, I saw things other men did not see, and heard things that other men did not hear

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